

## Short communications

### Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* at Ngulia, Kenya—first record for East Africa

On 19 November 1995, on a day with a large and varied passerine catch, an unusual warbler was netted at dawn at Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West National Park, Kenya (3°00'S, 38°13'E). Its head and bill shape and worn olive upperparts were at first glance like those of the many Marsh Warblers being ringed at the time, but moulting inner primaries, yellower underparts and a more rounded wing quickly marked it out as something different. The rather short undertail coverts and square tail indicated that it was a *Hippolais* warbler. Icterine Warbler *H. icterina* (a rare visitor at Ngulia) was considered, but the winglength (70.5 mm) was too short, and the wing formula wrong (first primary too long and second too short). The crown shape was more rounded than that typical of either Icterine or Olivaceous Warbler *H. pallida elaeica*. Plumage, soft part, structural and size characters all fitted those of Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* and it was identified as such.

A full description was taken, as follows:

**Plumage:** Upperparts worn, olive with slight greenish tinge, rather paler on rump. Whole underparts pale yellowish, more strongly yellow on newly growing feathers on centre of throat and breast. Loes and ear coverts pale olive, tinged buffish yellow. Supercilium pale yellow, quite prominent to *c.* 3 mm behind eye, merging into ear coverts further back. Unmoulted larger wing feathers brown with paler outer edges; smaller wing coverts olive; no pale panel on secondaries. New wing feathers (inner primaries and their coverts, greater coverts, centre tertial) blackish brown, greater coverts with broad greenish olive outer edges, centre tertial with narrow pale brown fringe but no bright outer edge. Bend of wing and underwing coverts pale yellow. New tail feathers dark olive, old outer pair faded brown with paler buffish tip.

**Soft parts:** Iris blackish brown; legs dark brownish grey; bill blackish horn above, paler along cutting edge, pinkish below.

**Measurements (in mm):** wing 70.5; tail 54; tarsus 20.5; bill length, to skull 16, to rear of nostril 11.5; bill width across rear of nostril 4.8. Weight 9.0 g (fat score 0).

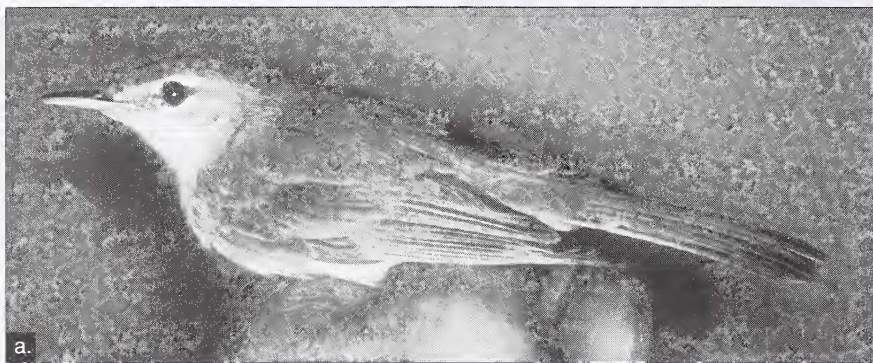
**Wing formula (primaries numbered from outermost inward):** P3 = P4 longest; P5 -0.5 mm, P6 -4 mm, (new P7 growing), new P10 -10 mm; P2 -5 mm, shorter than P5; small P1 quite broad, 5 mm longer than longest primary covert. PP 3-4 and tip of P5 emarginated.

**Tail:** square, outermost feather 3 mm shorter than longest (but unmoulted).

**Moult:** PP8-10 new, P7 growing; outermost secondary growing; central tertial new; inner four pairs of tail feathers new, T5 growing; greater coverts and inner primary coverts new. Rest of wing feathers and T6 unmoulted. New feathers growing on centre of throat and breast; body and head plumage otherwise old.

There were no tongue spots, but as the tips of the old primaries and tail feathers were only moderately worn the bird was considered to be first winter.

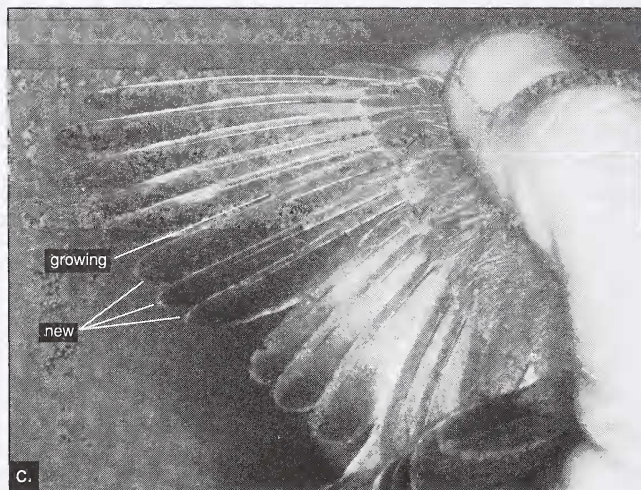
The bird was at the top of the winglength range of Melodious Warbler, but measurements and structural details appeared to rule out all other *Hippolais* warblers except Olivaceous *H. pallida elaeica*. Olivaceous Warbler, however, is pale brownish grey above when worn, and whitish below. Even in fresh plumage it has no more than



a.  
Photo: D. J. Pearson



b.  
Photo: G. C. Backhurst



c.  
Photo: D. J. Pearson

Figure 1. Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta*, Ngulia, 19 November 1995

a faint creamy wash below, and never has a yellow supercilium or yellow underwing coverts.

A small blood sample was taken, from which an analysis of mitochondrial DNA was kindly carried out in Germany in the laboratory of Dr Andreas Helbig. This confirmed the maternal identity of the bird as *H. polyglotta*.

The Melodious Warbler breeds in Europe east to Switzerland, Italy and Croatia, and also in northwest Africa (Cramp 1992). Its wintering range in humid savanna woodland in West Africa extends east to Cameroon, and there are three records from 17–18°E in the Central African Republic (Germain & Cornet 1994). The Ngulia bird was presumably a vagrant which migrated southeast rather than southwest, perhaps from the Adriatic area where the species' range meets that of southeastward-migrating Olivaceous and Olive-tree Warblers.

This appears to constitute the first satisfactory record of Melodious Warbler from eastern Africa and has been accepted as such by the East African Rarities Committee. Sassi (1916) listed a bird from Bukoba in northwestern Tanzania, later referred to by Vaurie (1959) and White (1960). But Grote (1930), Moreau (1937) and Chapin (1953) doubted this record, and in the absence of details or a located specimen it was rejected by Backhurst *et al.* (1973). A Uganda specimen in the British Museum, referred to by Williamson (1968) is, in fact, an Icterine Warbler (Backhurst *et al.*, *op. cit.*).

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